

# Is Teaching for Social Justice a “Liberal Bias”?

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**Background/Context:** *A charge heard repeatedly, especially in contemporary media by neo-conservatives such as David Horowitz and George Will, maintains that there is a “liberal bias” in North American academe. The primary grievance is that students in higher education are being indoctrinated into a left-wing ideology that discriminates against conservatives and that some professors are using their classrooms as a political podium at the expense of intellectual diversity.*

**Purpose/Objective/Research Question/Focus of Study:** *The purpose of this project is to analytically assess the charge of “liberal bias” as it is specifically leveled at those who make social justice education a requirement of higher education, and especially teacher education.*

**Research Design:** *Using conceptual analysis, this project highlights two aspects of the charge: the charge of “bias” and the charge of “ideology/imposition.” It is argued that the charge of bias is grounded in an assumption about teacher neutrality. The concept of teacher neutrality is examined and shown to be primarily concerned with evenhandedness. It is concluded that under conditions of systemic injustice, social justice education is evenhanded. The charge of ideology/imposition is then explored, and it is argued that the underlying concern revolves around the development of critical reflection. Four different readings of “ideology” are delineated. It is argued that social justice education, although ideological in some sense, does not in principle involve imposition because it promotes rather than arrests criticality. The type of criticality that social justice education promotes is then elucidated.*

**Conclusions/Recommendations:** *Making social justice education a requirement of higher education is both evenhanded and, although a type of ideology, it promotes rather than impedes criticality. Educational researchers are exhorted to be less concerned about bias and ideology in regard to social justice education and to turn their attention to how privileged students can be educated without recentring their privilege in ways that sacrifice the education of the marginalized.*

How can education recognize and repair not just the harm done by others but the harm that occurs under the name of education?<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

The charge that there is a “liberal bias” in North American academe has been a prominent one both in the media and in academic scholarship. It is an umbrella accusation that involves many allegations, including issues of hiring, promotion, and teaching. In an oft-cited 1999 study of college faculty, Stanley Rothman et al.<sup>2</sup> found that 72 percent of the professors self-identified as left/liberal, in contrast to only 15 percent who self-identified as right/conservative. In addition, a study that surveyed the political affiliations of professors at the University of California at Berkeley and at Stanford found that democrats were overwhelmingly predominant.<sup>3</sup> The primary grievances are that students in higher education are being indoctrinated into a left-wing ideology that discriminates against conservatives and that some professors are using their classrooms as a political podium at the expense of intellectual diversity. Whether these statistics are evidence for a “liberal bias” on North American campuses remains a hotly contested issue.<sup>4</sup>

This article engages the debate not at the point of contesting statistical imbalances. Rather, the focus is exclusively on the issues of pedagogical concern. A recent survey by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA)<sup>5</sup> claims that nearly half of the students at 50 of the top universities and colleges in the United States complained that there was a “totally one-sided” approach in their courses around controversial issues. Yet many issues that fall under the ambiguous category of “controversial issues” are conflated in this survey. This article is not focused on complaints about professors who publicly critique those who voted for Bush in the 2004 election or professors who supported Ward Churchill’s comments about 9-11. It is not about those who teach “conspiracy theories 101.”<sup>6</sup> Rather, this article is specifically concerned with an examination of the “liberal bias” critique as targeted against what is referred to as social justice education in higher education in general, and in schools of education and preservice teaching curriculum in particular.

Recently, Arthur Wise, National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) president, had to explain that the reference to social justice used in the NCATE glossary as an example of what teaching programs might consider when evaluating a prospective students’ “dispositions” helps schools of education measure how these prospective teach-

ers would respond in a classroom setting. Under increasing attack that “social justice” has become a code word for political and social indoctrination, Wise had to categorically deny that NCATE has a mandatory standard in regard to social justice that prospective teachers must fulfill. In the end, NCATE removed *all* references to social justice in its requirements.<sup>7</sup> It has become increasingly important to examine whether social justice education is a “liberal bias” and “leftist propaganda.”

On the one hand, it should be acknowledged that the accusation is to be welcomed in that it opens up a space to critically reflect on the goals of social justice education and whether such initiatives are effective. On the other hand, however, the charge is also dangerous. Since a classroom reflects and can perpetuate the culture of power<sup>8</sup> when it reproduces the social relations and hierarchical dynamics situated in everyday interactions of the wider society, the acclaim given to the charge of liberal bias can result in encouraging privileged students to resist, and to justify their disengagement from, considering the culture of power, especially as it is manifested in the classroom.

What is social justice education? The objectives of social justice education will be addressed in more detail. Initially it is sufficient to understand that social justice education extends and critiques understandings of diversity that are understood to be just about the recognition and celebration of difference and that are exclusively focused on remedying prejudice and hate. It acknowledges that today, for example, new types of racism operate as effects of covert systems and that those who perpetrate and sustain such systems are not easily detected. Nevertheless, the effects of these new types of racism are lethal, contributing to the pitiful situation of educational inequality in the contemporary United States. To work toward challenging systemic injustice, according to those who advocate social justice education, requires that we recognize not only the system but also our complicity in it.

The article begins with an examination of the pervasiveness of the charge of liberal bias, especially in discussions about higher education in the United States. Because the charge has recently been hurled at schools of education that are explicit about their commitments to social justice, this discussion is especially relevant for those involved in teacher education programs and those who are interested in the types of educators graduating from those programs and going on to teach in the K–12 schooling system. Two aspects of the charge are highlighted—the charge of bias and the charge of ideology/imposition. The charge of bias, it is argued, is grounded in an assumption about teacher neutrality and is primarily concerned with teachers being evenhanded and fair. This section concludes that under conditions of systemic injustice, when the

classroom is not an equal playing field, social justice education, in principle, is evenhanded.

The charge of ideology/imposition is then explored, and it is argued that the underlying concern is mainly about the development of critical reflection. Four different readings of the “ideology” are delineated, and this section concludes that social justice education, although ideological in some sense, does not, in principle, involve imposition because it promotes rather than arrests a certain type of criticality that is elucidated.

Finally, why privileged students who take dominant beliefs and privileges for granted may *feel* that such pedagogy involves imposition is discussed and what it means to be *engaged in learning about systemic injustice even if one disagrees* is addressed. It is recommended that those concerned with education focus less on whether social justice education is a liberal bias and instead turn their attention to the ways in which resisting privileged students can be engaged without recentring their privilege and sacrificing the education of more marginalized peers.

#### THE CHARGE OF “LIBERAL BIAS”

The charge of liberal bias is not unfamiliar to those who teach with commitments to social justice. Lana Rakow,<sup>9</sup> a feminist teacher who teaches a course titled Communication and the Human Condition, recounts how a white male student responded to her presentation summarizing research that questioned the generic masculinity of English. “You are way out of line, shoving this dogma down our throats!”<sup>10</sup> the student protested. Rather than engage with the evidence that Rakow provided, the student dismissed Rakow and the scholarship she presented under the indictment that she is force-feeding her students a liberal bias.

In another noteworthy case, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) accused Lynn Weber of “imposing dogma” and a “liberal bias” because she enunciated certain discussion guidelines in her syllabus for an advanced seminar in women’s studies. In these guidelines, Weber asked students *for this course* to “acknowledge that racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, and other institutionalized forms of oppression exist” and to “agree to combat actively the myths and stereotypes about our own groups and other groups so that we can break down the walls that prohibit group cooperation and group gain.”<sup>11</sup> One of the students in Weber’s class objected to “being told to think that way.” FIRE somehow found out about the student’s complaint, and the organization sent a letter to the university accusing Weber’s guidelines of being “a threat to freedom of both speech and conscience.” Charles Duncan, chairman of the university’s College Republicans chapter, added his support to the

letter by declaring that the guidelines represented a “closed mind to conservative opinions” and to those who have beliefs that conflict with those of the professor. Duncan said he personally would take issue with guidelines that asked students to acknowledge heterosexism, stating, “My personal opinion is that homosexuality is wrong.”<sup>12</sup>

In the latest salvo of the ongoing culture wars around “political correctness,” David Horowitz claims that universities are hotbeds of “liberal ideology” where professors not only indoctrinate students with a one-sided ideology but also are intolerant and exclusive of all views that do not comport with their own. Specifically, Horowitz is concerned that this leaning toward “liberal ideology” silences students who espouse conservative worldviews. Horowitz particularly targets courses that teach for social justice because, as he claims, such courses are based on one-sided, emotionally laden, and politically infected beliefs rather than legitimate scholarship.<sup>13</sup> Quoting from the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) report mentioned earlier, Horowitz claims that students complain that their professors “use the classroom to present their personal political views”<sup>14</sup> regardless of the subject and that conservative viewpoints are cut off while students with more left-leaning comments are allowed “to ramble on”<sup>15</sup> with approval. Horowitz concludes that what “left liberal professors” are doing in the classroom is not education but ideology and, with the support of such organizations of FIRE, he has drawn up an Academic Bill of Rights to protect students with conservative viewpoints from such marginalization.

Horowitz, appropriating the language of the left, lashes out at radical professors, claiming that they have created a “hostile learning environment for conservative students.” He laments the “under-represented” conservative viewpoint on college campuses and in academic classrooms. His calls for fairness and inclusion in our universities are intertwined with demands for “balance” and “intellectual diversity.” To realize this, he launched the Campaign for Fairness and Inclusion in Higher Education, organized a group called Students for Academic Freedom, and drew up a Students’ Bill of Rights (ostensibly based on the idea of academic freedom established by the American Association of University Professors [AAUP]) that has been presented for approval to state legislatures across the United States. Although Horowitz has not openly called for the end of social justice education, such progressive programs such as women’s studies departments, cultural studies, and, particularly, schools of education, have been targets of his invectives.

The charge of liberal bias has become a particularly recurrent theme against those schools of education that have explicit statements articulating commitments to social justice. George F. Will<sup>16</sup> rebukes such schools

of education that aim to prepare teachers who promote social justice, who will be social change agents, who will be able to recognize individual and institutional oppression, and who know how to create antiracist, anti-sexist, and antihomophobic communities in their classrooms. Will targets the NCATE, alleging that in 2002, it made it a requirement of teacher certification for teachers to demonstrate “professional dispositions” that reflect a commitment to social justice. He contends that schools of education that require such dispositions in teachers are imposing dogma rather than knowledge. Arthur Wise has responded to Will, contending that NCATE does not have a social justice requirement but rather that NCATE does require that teacher candidates know how to teach all students. As noted earlier, this point is now moot, given that NCATE has removed all references to “social justice” from its documents. It is true, however, that many schools of education have a commitment to social justice among the NCATE dispositions that they assess.<sup>17</sup>

A case that concretely illustrates the target of Will’s consternation involves Scott McConnell, a nonmatriculated student at LeMoyne College who, in 2005, was refused matriculation into the graduate teacher program because he expressed views that LeMoyne College claimed were inappropriate for a future public school teacher. In a final course paper, McConnell wrote that he believes schools should endorse corporeal punishment and, most relevant for our discussion, that multicultural education should “ha(ve) no philosophical place or standing in the American classroom, especially the one I teach.”<sup>18</sup> McConnell sued LeMoyne College and lost, but then won on appeal. LeMoyne College claims that it will appeal the decision.<sup>19</sup>

What does this charge of liberal bias mean? To ascertain if teaching for social justice is unfair and whether it necessarily requires indoctrination and propaganda, we must be clear what the charge implies. It should be explicitly acknowledged that this article does not deny that the way in which a particular professor teaches courses about social justice can be “out of line.” Yet delineating the criteria by which to access such a charge would first require an explanation of how teaching for social justice, teaching with commitments to challenging systemic oppression—although perhaps a bias in a sense to be explained—does not necessarily impose or indoctrinate.

The charge of liberal bias seems to have at least two dimensions. The first can be understood to focus literally on “bias.” This aspect of the charge assumes that teacher neutrality is possible and is primarily concerned with the teacher being evenhanded and fair. In other words, when a teacher is charged with bias, this implies some sort of discriminatory partiality. The second aspect of the charge seems more focused on

imposition, propaganda, and indoctrination. Here, social justice education is accused of being ideological and counter to education. In what follows, the role of neutrality in education is addressed. Then the meanings and uses of “ideology” are delineated with the aim to understand whether social justice education is ideological and, if so, in what sense. Finally, some objectives of social justice education will be explored. An important question weaves throughout the discussion that I have addressed elsewhere<sup>20</sup>: Is it ever warranted to silence students whose beliefs are opposed to those presented by social justice educators and who *refuse to seriously engage* with the ideas, concepts, and theories being taught in such courses?

### IS SOCIAL JUSTICE EDUCATION BIASED? THE ASSUMPTION OF TEACHER NEUTRALITY

Teacher neutrality has long been an issue of venerable concern in educational thought, and various rationales for the demand have been emphasized. The demand often maintains that teachers should not express their particular opinions and viewpoints in the classroom because, as an authority, the teacher who makes his or her viewpoint public will intimidate and thereby silence students who hold opposing views. When a teacher uses his or her authority to promote one side or opinion over another or takes a partisan role in classroom discussions, especially if the topic is a controversial issue, opposing views may not be expressed, and the fair competition in the classroom among a marketplace of ideas is thwarted.

The demand for teacher neutrality is thusly concerned, first and foremost, with fairness and evenhandedness. The teacher’s role must be as a nonpartisan referee who ensures that a diversity of viewpoints receives a hearing in an atmosphere of rational debate. The teacher must strive to make the classroom an environment where all viewpoints can be heard and considered. Even if a viewpoint is opposed to his or her own, the teacher must not engage in evaluation and should remain neutral.<sup>21</sup>

Sometimes the demand for teacher neutrality also refers to the demand that education not be based on prior political or ideological commitments.<sup>22</sup> Teacher advocacy is objectionable in this sense not only because it can inhibit students from expressing opposing viewpoints but also because it obstructs the ability of the student to be rationally persuaded by the evidence. Since students want to get good grades, students might be unduly influenced by the teacher’s personal viewpoint and uncritically adopt such a viewpoint *because* the teacher holds it. The issues of whether social justice education arrests students’ critical deliberation

on an issue will be discussed in the next section. In this section, we will focus on the demand for teacher neutrality in the sense of fairness and evenhandedness.

What does teacher neutrality, in the sense of fairness and evenhandedness, require in a classroom where conditions of power and privilege operate, although often not acknowledged, just as they do in the larger society? Two questions immediately arise. First, is teacher neutrality limited to only public expressions of viewpoint, or are there more implicit ways that teachers' viewpoints are expressed in the classroom? Examining this question will help us to get a better understanding of whether it is possible for teachers to be neutral and whether the demand for teacher neutrality actually functions as a myth that can prevent critical reflection of the culture of power in the classroom. Second, must the teacher allow and encourage the expression of all viewpoints in the classroom? In other words, it is important to be clear what it means to be fair and evenhanded when students are already being silenced. What it means to be balanced and fair in the classroom might require some silencing of voices that are derailing the discussion and preventing the playing field from being equal.

The debate over "advocacy in the classroom," as Helene Moglen<sup>23</sup> argues, has been one of the major battles in the continuing "culture wars." A feminist teacher is often assumed to be the paradigm of teacher advocacy, for what could it mean to be a feminist teacher and yet be neutral about, for example, patriarchy? Yet even in courses that ostensibly appear to be politically neutral, every decision that a teacher makes—from, for instance, text selection to syllabus construction—requires the teacher to take a stance that seems to rule out teacher neutrality. Even in terms of pedagogy, as Elizabeth Ellsworth<sup>24</sup> reminds us, teachers do not shed their identities when they walk into the classroom, but rather continue to be situated as subjects who interpret other identities through their own, and also claim identities and are ascribed identities by others. When it is assumed that teachers can act as if they bring nothing into the classroom, teachers do not have to examine how their own identities and the frameworks within which they are constituted influence how they understand who their students are and what can be expected of them.

Gloria Ladson-Billings<sup>25</sup> discusses how a teachers' social location can affect how one is perceived by students and can influence whether students perceive him or her as "biased." Ladson-Billings describes how a white man who teaches at one of the most prestigious universities in the United States explained that when he taught issues of race, his students perceived him as being "objective," "scholarly," and "disinterested." Yet when his female African American colleague taught a similar course, stu-



dents perceived her as “self-interested,” “bitter,” or “putting forth a particular agenda.” In addition, as many educational researchers have demonstrated,<sup>26</sup> normative values can be conveyed through the hidden curriculum even without the teacher’s awareness or intention. Jane Roland Martin, for instance, makes a compelling argument that even the words teachers decide to use to describe student behavior are normatively tinged.<sup>27</sup>

In a response to Mary Warnock’s<sup>28</sup> seminal argument that teacher ought not to be neutral, Richard Norman<sup>29</sup> suggests that teachers cannot be neutral because education is always partisan.

One has only to invoke the notorious “Janet and John,” or their equivalents, to be reminded how political values enter even here. The normative status which is implicitly attributed to the respectable middle-class home, the nuclear family, masculine superiority, in reading material of this kind, is familiar and easily mocked. It is a fit subject for ridicule, but the point is a serious one. Reading is not a pure technique. What the child learns to read has a content and in particular it is likely to have a moral and social content of one sort or another. Moreover, the content that is chosen will reflect a particular conception of the social use which the technique of reading is intended to serve. . . . In short, to exclude is as political a step as to include.<sup>30</sup>

Like Moglen, Norman seems to imply not only that teacher neutrality is a myth but also that pedagogical partisanship is particularly insidious when it is practiced invisibly. Academic neutrality, in this sense, can support oppression by default.

Academic neutrality does not necessarily equal “balance” but rather can function to normalize dominance, especially when the dominant status quo is not acknowledged, as the following case described by Deidre Kelly and Gabriella Brandes<sup>31</sup> illustrates. Kelly and Brandes recount how a teacher organized a unit on “the opening of the west,” including a section on the aboriginal perspective with the intention of balancing the Eurocentric story with other historical interpretations. To the teacher’s surprise, the students did not see this balancing as teacher neutrality and accused the teacher of bias and of imposing his own viewpoint on the class.<sup>32</sup> In other words, it was the teacher’s attempts to be evenhanded and impartial that was the source of his being charged with bias! In this case, the accusation of bias had less to do with evenhandedness and seems to have functioned to support the rejection of any challenge to what is normalized as true. Gerald Graff notes an invidious double stan-

dard when he explains that “teachers who raise questions about power and injustice are being ‘political,’ ‘partisan,’ and thus ‘imposing’ an ideology, while those who ignore or reject such questions presumably are not.”<sup>33</sup> Under conditions in which education covertly reproduces dominance, demanding teacher neutrality (like ignoring color<sup>34</sup>) is not a corrective to bias but actually sustains it.

Moglen maintains that the teacher is not neutral when he or she challenges the dominant understanding of knowledge, but neither is the teacher neutral who supports dominant viewpoints. If the dominant viewpoint remains unchallenged in the classroom, this is not neutrality but a validation of the dominant viewpoint as the only truth. Moglen suggests that teachers acknowledge their advocacy and make it a topic of classroom discussion. Deidre Kelly and Gabriella Brandes contend that because multiple perspectives do not compete on a level playing field, teachers must “shift out of neutral” and critique power asymmetries.

This is not to say that shifting out of neutral does not have its risks, as Bill Bigelow<sup>35</sup> honestly recognizes. Bigelow describes the dilemma he faced when he developed a lesson plan about Nike and global capitalism.

On the one hand, I had no desire to feign neutrality—to hide my conviction that people here need to care about and act in solidarity with workers around the world in their struggles for better lives. To pretend that I was a mere dispenser of information would be dishonest, but worse, it would imply that being a spectator is an ethical response to injustice. It would model a stance of moral apathy. I wanted students to know these issues were important to me, that I cared enough to do something about them. On the other hand, I never want my social concerns to suffocate student inquiry or to prevent students from thoughtfully considering opposing views.<sup>36</sup>

Bigelow is concerned with elementary school students, but his pedagogical dilemma raises a broader question for educators. Some may respond that that is why it is crucial to ensure that all students’ viewpoints receive an equal and respectful hearing in the classroom. Yet the demand for such evenhandedness, I submit, is often less evenhanded than its advocates presume.

Joshua A. Corngold and David Waddington,<sup>37</sup> in a panel discussion at the Philosophy of Education Society in 2006, for instance, express concern for the stance of open advocacy in regard to what they refer to as “disputed” issues. In response to an incident that I discuss in another article,<sup>38</sup> they describe me as “aggressively” challenging a religious student

who insisted she did not have to read any of the articles about gays and lesbians because she has learned to “love the sinner and hate the sin.” They acknowledge that my student’s expression of her viewpoint has the potential to silence and hurt the gay and lesbian students in my classroom. Yet Corngold and Waddington immediately retreat from that acknowledgement and, in their support of what they refer to as “*even-handed* disclosure,” demonstrate more concern for the religious student who was silenced by my questioning than they do for the gay student who did not say a word during the entire incident. Moreover, they overlook that it is not that the religious student’s views were not given expression. Rather, the point was that after she expressed a refusal to engage, her *public* expression was curtailed. The student was invited to my office to discuss these matters with me in private.

Teachers often make the comfort and safety of students who are systemically privileged a priority, with the consequence that the needs and safety of the systemically marginalized are further marginalized. This is particularly manifest in the call to “educate, don’t ostracize” that has been a common rejoinder to debates around free speech on college campuses. Tim Wise<sup>39</sup> asks, “patience and education at whose expense?” Although it is important to help students to recognize the racial effects of their practices and discourse all things considered, the rights of students, staff, and faculty of color to work and be educated in an environment free from overt and covert forms of racial discrimination must also be considered an equally important factor.

Wise highlights that one of the consequences of an absolutist position of “educate don’t ostracize” is that the message is conveyed to students of color that their concerns and needs are not as important as those of the dominant. The possible effect is the support of institutional racism when students of color increasingly drop out of higher education because their fears and their safety have not been taken seriously enough or when they hesitate to enroll into predominantly white institutions. Karen Elias, a white educator who teaches with commitments to social justice recalls an incident that occurred in her freshman, writing seminar:

Some white students began vigorously denying the existence of racial profiling. I tried using these comments as springboards for further analysis, but I noticed that a young Afro-Caribbean woman was obviously disturbed. She met with me in private to say that she was having a hard time sitting through the class. “I hear enough of this in my daily life,” she said. “I shouldn’t have to put up with it here. . . .” One of my biggest fears is that despite my best intentions, the racist dynamics of the larger society will get

replicated in the classroom. Her words had a profound impact on me.<sup>40</sup>

If the small numbers and percentages of people of color who attend predominantly white schools are influenced even the slightest bit by efforts to educate but not ostracize, the educational access and opportunities of students of color have been sacrificed once again for the educational access and opportunities of the dominant. Institutional racism is supported rather than challenged. The crucial question, I contend, is, as Patti Duncan notes, “How can we reach white students to teach them about race—especially accountability and white privilege—without simply recentering them (and whiteness) to the exclusion and detriment of students of color?”<sup>41</sup>

Both Mimi Orner<sup>42</sup> and Elizabeth Ellsworth caution educators about the limitations and dangers of calling for the free expression of student voices, especially when, as Ellsworth puts it, “acting as if our classroom were a safe space in which democratic dialogue was possible and happening did not make it so.”<sup>43</sup> The culture of power that exists in the classroom involves conditions of structural oppression. As Iris Marion Young<sup>44</sup> explains about society in general, under conditions of structural oppression, the playing field is not equal.

If group-based positional differences give to some people greater power, material and cultural resources, and authoritative voice, then social norms and discourses which appear impartial are often biased. Under circumstances of structural social and economic inequality, the relative power of some groups often allows them to dominate the definition of the common good in ways compatible with their experience, perspective, and priorities.<sup>45</sup>

When educators acknowledge the culture of power in the classroom and that the playing field is not equal, allowing all voices expression is not fair. The difficult question, then, remains, How can privileged students be educated without recentering their privilege in ways that sacrifice the safety and education of the marginalized?

### IS SOCIAL JUSTICE EDUCATION IDEOLOGY, NOT EDUCATION?

The charge of liberal bias suggests (but also sometimes explicitly asserts) that what is being taught is not only biased but also ideological. What does it mean to label something “ideological”? Nicholas Burbules<sup>46</sup> suggests that the concept of ideology is itself a site of ideological struggle and

contestation because competing notions of ideology imply different epistemological and political positions. Raymond Geuss<sup>47</sup> argues that the term “ideology” is used in different ways partly because social theorists who use the term are trying to answer different questions. I want to delineate at least four ways that the term “ideology” is used that are relevant to our discussion of the charge of liberal bias: pejoratively as an empty slur, pejoratively as contrasted with true knowledge, nonevaluatively or descriptively, and a constructive/pragmatic usage. Although I will not explicitly focus on the questions that those who use the term “ideology” assume (as Geuss does), I hope it will be clear that the last sense of “ideology” forefronts questions that are radically different from the other senses that I describe.

### IDEOLOGY AS AN EMPTY SLUR

In mainstream discourse, the term “ideology” is frequently used as an empty slur against any political position that is opposed to one’s own. As Michael Apple<sup>48</sup> intimates, the concept is often used as “a bludgeon with which one hits an opponent over the head (Aha, your thought is no more than ideology and can be ignored).”<sup>49</sup> Similarly, Burbules aptly describes this problematic use of the term as

a handy way of attributing (to a belief system) a host of implied failings—political contentiousness, manipulative uses of language, partisan rantings, sloppiness, inaccuracy, or downright falsehood—without bothering to substantiate such accusations. Thus, even identifying a system of belief as “ideological” implies that one already has criticisms of it, criticisms that frequently are left implied and are not articulated or defended.<sup>50</sup>

Although it appears that the term “ideology” is often used as an empty slur in the debates around the liberal bias of social justice education, I am more concerned with the serious questions raised in the more academic scholarship and thus turn to how the term “ideology” has been used there.

### IDEOLOGY—PEJORATIVE AND OPPOSED TO TRUE KNOWLEDGE

A second way that the term “ideology” is used is also pejorative in that ideologies are assumed to be in opposition to true knowledge but, unlike using ideology as an empty slur, those who refer to “ideology” in this sense make the grounds for their claims explicit. The grounds for the

pejorative sense involve at least two failures. The first type of failure focuses on a falling short of the standards of rationality, while the second type of failure emphasizes more how such beliefs are held. When someone or some belief or some set of beliefs is said to be ideological, it is because it or they are partisan and one sided (dependent on ideology). More specifically, ideologies in this sense “ignore the facts, they argue fallaciously, they distort the truth, and so on.”<sup>51</sup> Overcoming ideology in this sense involves becoming more rational in order to uncover the relevant epistemic deficiencies. Education that attempts to combat ideology thus would focus on ameliorating individual irrationality and ignorance by developing better critical thinking skills in students.

Burbules explains that it is this conception of ideology that leads prominent advocates of critical thinking, such as Harvey Siegel, to contend that if ideologies admit of critique, rationality and critical thinking cannot be regarded as just another ideology because ideology *presupposes* a commitment to rationality and the demand for reasons.<sup>52</sup> According to Siegel, “One must take rationality, and reasons, seriously in order even to raise the question of the possible influence of ideology on the evaluation of reasons.”<sup>53</sup> In other words, rationality is understood as necessarily detached from and prior to ideology.

The Marxist conception of false consciousness lays the groundwork for the second type of failure that “ideology” underscores. Ideology is opposed to knowledge because it involves an incorrect understanding or illusionary interpretation of the social world. Ideologies involve false beliefs that are taken to be true and so are illusionary, and most often involve beliefs that mask and support the operations of those in power. John Thompson<sup>54</sup> maintains that ideologies are systems of belief that support power hierarchies by means of justification (legitimation), dissimulation (masking or mystification), and/or reification (naturalization). What the conception of ideology that is grounded in “false consciousness” emphasizes is not only the substantive falseness of the belief system but also how the beliefs are held by individuals when “the real motive forces impelling him remain unknown to him.”<sup>55</sup> Such a use of the concept problematically assumes that the one who makes the charge has some type of privileged access to the truth or, more specifically, a “true consciousness” that can be taken up, external to all ideologies, from which ideology can be assessed.

This use of ideology as false consciousness has the benefit of recognizing that oppressive systems are not just the result of individual faulty reasoning and that a failure to attend to selected evidence is systematically promoted. This point is underscored in Tommie Shelby’s<sup>56</sup> reminder that ideology is not necessarily about the individual’s belief or his or her

particular mental life. Ideology involves a socially constructed and supported network of beliefs.<sup>57</sup> A belief or practice is understood to be “ideological” because it is part of a system of interconnected beliefs that appear to have compelling explanatory or justificatory power to those who hold them. Shelby emphasizes that such belief systems are so deeply entrenched that they come to be understood as “common sense” or “common knowledge.” They are so firmly held that they are difficult to critique. To label someone or some beliefs ideological is to imply that the beliefs espoused are not only false but also uncritically held. When “ideology” is used in this sense, therefore, dogmatism and a resistance to engage in critique is forefronted. As Burbules notes, “To be ideological is to be resistant to criticism; to insulate certain beliefs from the possibility of being questioned or to deflect questions as being illegitimate or irrelevant.”<sup>58</sup>

Whether ideologies refer to a lack of rationality and critical thinking, or whether they refer to what is held in a dogmatic fashion, these two uses of ideology can be grouped together because they both assume that ideologies are pejorative and that there is a position one can take external to ideologies from which to judge reality with neither distortion nor prejudice. Michel Foucault rejected the term “ideology” for this latter reason, arguing that theories of ideology assume the possibility of a pure or transparent form of knowledge, whereas “truth” must always be interrogated for its institutional moorings within forms of discourse from which “truths” are established. According to Foucault, the political question should not be focused on ideology but on the conditions of truth itself. For Foucault, “Truth isn’t outside power.”<sup>59</sup>

## IDEOLOGY AS DESCRIPTIVE

A third way that the term “ideology” is used in academic scholarship is nonevaluative, descriptive, or at least not pejorative. This understanding of ideology is based on the premise that we cannot access the “real” except through language and discourse. Ideology involves the way the real is constructed. In its nonevaluative sense, ideology refers to the idea that we are always within ideological systems because of our reliance on language to establish what is real. Raymond Williams<sup>60</sup> contends that ideology is the condition of all life, and Ludwig Wittgenstein<sup>61</sup> argues that a world-picture provides the “substratum of all my inquiry and asserting”<sup>62</sup> and “the inherited background against which I distinguish true and false.”<sup>63</sup> If, following Zeus Leonardo,<sup>64</sup> language is not “outside” of nor a reflection of reality but that which organizes reality so that subjects can render reality intelligible, then there is no way out of ideology. Ideology

is “comprised of the discursive repertoires that people take up, first to create their world and second to gain meaning from it.”<sup>65</sup> Ideology is not just about false and distorted ideas floating around in our minds, but rather what informs our understanding and interpretation of our everyday experiences and the way we make sense of the social world in which we live our lives. As Raymond Williams argues, there is no “outside” of ideology because our experiences only make sense to us through the meanings given to them, and such meanings are dependent on the cultural tools and frameworks that we have at our disposal.

The nonevaluative use of the term “ideology” refers to a structure of representation through which we experience and make sense not only of our world but also of ourselves. As Ruth Behar emphasizes, “Cultural forms run deep in the river of being.”<sup>66</sup> Ideology not only gives meaning to our experiences but also constitutes identity, or who we understand ourselves and others to be. Following Louis Althusser’s idea that “all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete individuals,”<sup>67</sup> E. Doyle McCarthy<sup>68</sup> explains,

ideologies connect people with one another, with a world, and, perhaps, most especially, with *themselves*. Ideologies bestow identities. For what is known and believed and thought are not merely knowledges, beliefs, or thoughts, they are what I know and what I believe and what I think. They inscribe in what I do, who I am—my identity.<sup>69</sup>

Harvey Siegel contests the “everything is ideology” claim with a compelling argument that was briefly noted above. Rationality, according to Siegel, must be prior to ideology if the notion of having good reasons is to make any sense. There is no way to rationally justify educational ideals if good reasons involve ideological commitments that make such ideals appear “rational.” Moreover, the claim itself that everything is ideological requires rationality for its own justification and, thus, “rationality *transcends* ideology and is capable of assessing the worth both of alternative ideologies and of alternative educational ideals.”<sup>70</sup> But does the defense of some notion of good reasons require that such reasons be necessarily ideologically neutral? Emily Robertson<sup>71</sup> argues that

rationality must be *conceived of* as autonomous from ideological constraints; our principles of rationality do purport to be “impartial and universal.” But the only principles we have and can have are immanent in evolving traditions of rational criticism; we cannot stand on neutral ground.<sup>72</sup>



According to Robertson, the choice is not between either a rationality that is prior to ideology or a rationality that has no value because it is ideology dependent; following Hilary Putnam,<sup>73</sup> rationality is conceived of as transcendent but also immanent (i.e., that rationality is manifested by human beings as discursively articulated and mediated). This does not necessitate that rational evaluation is valueless; on the contrary, by acknowledging our prior commitments, we open the way to more honest rational assessment. Robertson suggests that researchers turn their attention to “how one can recognize inadequacies in a form of thinking and amend it even while employing it.”<sup>74</sup>

Siegel agrees. Responding to Dennis Cato<sup>75</sup> and Mark Selman,<sup>76</sup> Siegel maintains that he does not dispute the fact that rational assessment is immanent: “We judge where we are—from where else could we judge?—and we judge the strengths and limitations of own positions even as we occupy it in judging other matters.”<sup>77</sup>

Rational judgments are fallible, as Siegel acknowledges, and can be rationally revised when further evidence and reflection become available.<sup>78</sup> The remedy for irrationality, therefore, seems to be more highly developed rationality.

Under conditions of systemic injustice, however, the demand for more rational deliberation can possibly get in the way of challenging systemic oppression and privilege. I am reminded of an incident that occurred at my own university in 2005 that illustrates somewhat the point I am trying to make. The chancellor, Nancy Cantor, had revoked the status of HillTV, a university-supported TV station, because one of the programs, *Over the Hill*, had violated the student code by using offensive sexist, racist, and homophobic content. As the discussions around the chancellor’s decision were hotly debated, questions of free speech were at the forefront. What receded into the background was the fact that marginalized students felt they were unsafe on our campus. The harms resulting from the *Over the Hill* broadcast had contributed to the hostile environment that already prevailed.

Yet the focus of the debates and panel discussions was the question of free speech. Systemically privileged professors and students were incredulous at the claim that the university was not a safe place for everyone. In some cases, it seemed perfectly rational to demand that these claims be substantiated by statistical evidence when it is clear that so often, an unsafe atmosphere is difficult to quantify and difficult to prove to those who do not experience its effects.

Whereas by her actions, the chancellor understood the necessity of making a statement to marginalized students on campus and conveying the message that “this will not be tolerated,” the rational debates around

freedom of speech had the consequence of victimizing the marginalized doubly. When the demand for rational deliberation assumes that everyone has equal subject standing and is capable of articulating and defending his or her position as logical and rational, such deliberations may disadvantage the marginalized not only because the burden to “prove” their anguish falls upon them but also because if their experiences cannot be framed in a way that the systemically privileged can hear, such experiences can be perceived as irrational and dismissed.

### IDEOLOGY THAT HIGHLIGHTS A PARTICULAR TYPE OF CRITICALITY

To both understand rationality as immanent and fallible and also to expose when rationality might be in the service of sustaining systemic injustice, I submit, it is important to understand a fourth, contemporary use of ideology that is grounded in a different type of criticality that advocates of critical thinking and rationality may overlook or de-emphasize. Social justice education does not assume that one can stand “outside” of ideologies but thus invokes a radically different type of criticality that seeks to challenge whatever it is that keeps systemic social injustice in place, even if it is the demand for rationality itself. While some scholars have insisted that the concept of ideology be abolished because it assumes the existence of a nonideological realm and a problematic conception of subjectivity,<sup>79</sup> Zeus Leonardo calls for a “rehabilitation of ideology,” stripping it from its purely pejorative connotation but also rearticulating the concept in a way that will “reestablish the centrality of critique as a primary mode of education.”<sup>80</sup>

Ideology, according to Leonardo, is the “problem of social relations of domination made intelligible through discourse.”<sup>81</sup> By this, Leonardo means to underscore that ideology is a response to unjust relations and that ideology can sustain or resist and even transform those relations. Moreover, it is not only that ideology is known via systems of intelligibility, such as language, but that ideology is “constitutive of these mechanism rather than outside of them.”<sup>82</sup> What is different about ideology in this sense is, first, that although it does not eschew critique, it also does not assume a position that is external to ideology. As David Couzens Hoy<sup>83</sup> explains, even when one resists power, one is still “contextually bound to the social and psychological structures that are being resisted.”

Second, the type of criticality that is highlighted in this sense of ideology affords a critique and exposure of the limitation of traditional standards of criticality highlighting our complicity in systems of oppression and privilege. In this sense, ideology can be both something to be

avoided and something positive and constructive. As Leonardo contends, “ideology may promote or negate domination.”<sup>84</sup>

Social justice education, I submit, is an ideology, but it involves an ideology that does not exclude itself from critique and in fact requires a type of engagement that contests a resistance to criticism of what is taken for granted by critique itself. As such, social justice education promotes a particular type of fallibility that involves a continued vigilance *because* no one stands outside of power relations. Nevertheless, one can still make judgments about what is better or worse in terms of exposing or hiding certain experiences under conditions of systemic social injustice. It is in this sense that social justice education is ideological but also educative, as I hope the following will make clear.

### A DIFFERENT TYPE OF CRITICALITY?

Ideology in this fourth evaluative sense implies critique, but what type of critique does it assume? In his discussion of critical thinking and critical pedagogy, Nicholas Burbules<sup>85</sup> discusses and contrasts the different types of criticality that these approaches to education presuppose. For advocates of critical thinking, being impartial is key, and teachers must avoid any advocacy because of the risk of imposing their viewpoint, their values, or their beliefs on their students. Advocates of critical pedagogy, Burbules explains, claim that this “impartiality” functions to support the political status quo that remains as the invisible and uncontested background.<sup>86</sup>

Although critical pedagogy has itself been the target of critique,<sup>87</sup> this approach has brought to the forefront questions about the relationship between knowledge and power that go unaddressed when dominant interpretations become so normalized and naturalized that such questions are not deemed warranted to ask. Social justice education, I contend, introduces students to this type of critical reflection. Foucault brought to our attention how discursive practices determine what can be said, what must remain unsaid, and, most important, what it is possible to think. The type of criticality that critical pedagogy promotes involves asking questions that are often not considered possible to think. This type of criticality not only compliments but also enhances the criticality that critical thinking advocates endorse.

From the perspective of proponents of critical thinking, however, critical pedagogy may seem to be imposing because it is directive and has an “agenda.” Because critical pedagogy begins with the premise that systemic social injustice exists, it comes very close to “cross(ing) a threshold between teaching critically and indoctrinating.”<sup>88</sup> From the perspective of

advocates of critical pedagogy, however, schools are never neutral and are already involved in “agendas.” As Burbules aptly puts it, “Critical Thinking’s claim is, at heart, to teach how to think critically, not how to think politically; for Critical Pedagogy, this is a false distinction.”<sup>89</sup> The type of criticality that critical pedagogy endorses is important for social justice education, in which assumptions of neutrality in education are examined.

Some students may still charge a teacher who is committed to social justice with “liberal bias” even when he or she is not indoctrinating because they *feel* silenced, especially because their voices are no longer center staged or because they refuse to critically examine their own beliefs. This does not necessarily mean that the teacher is indoctrinating or imposing his or her views. The aims of social justice education can be biased in the sense that they are clearly taking a position on the existence and the meaning of social injustice. Yet social justice education does not necessarily involve indoctrination because such courses aim to enhance rather than arrest criticality. It is important to acknowledge, however, that how to motivate students to engage rather than resist and dismiss is an ongoing pedagogical concern that becomes even more complicated when one’s objective is to also make the classroom safe for the traditionally marginalized.

The type of criticality that critical pedagogy advocates is particularly important for social justice educators because it is students’ assumptions that they can stand outside of systems of oppression and privilege that prevent them from understanding how they are complicit. For example, in relation to privilege, Harry Brod argues,

We need to be clear that there is no such thing as giving up one’s privilege to be “outside” the system. One is always in the system. The only question is whether one is part of a system that challenges or strengthens the status quo. Privilege is not something I *take* and which I therefore have the option of *not* taking. It is something that society *gives* me, and unless I change the institutions which give it to me, they will continue to give it, and I will continue to *have* it, however noble and egalitarian my intentions.<sup>90</sup>

To understand how students can challenge the privilege they have, it is imperative that they understand that they cannot stand outside the system. This does not mean that they cannot take an antioppression stand, but it does make taking such a position more complicated than they might assume.

The type of criticality promoted by critical pedagogy has been enriched by postmodern/poststructural insights. Employing such insights, Gert Biesta<sup>91</sup> contends that criticality involves questioning what is “impossible,” which he claims “does not refer to what is *not* possible, but to what cannot be foreseen, predicted and calculated as a possibility” (147). Against the charge of relativism often associated with postmodern scholarship, Biesta emphasizes that postmodernism is not to be equated with relativism. This is a category mistake because postmodernism, rather, questions the assumptions upon which charges of relativism are grounded. Postmodernists challenge the dualisms in which knowledge is either objective or subjective, and values are either universal or relative. Biesta argues that postmodernism

wants to go *beyond* objectivism and relativism. It wants to show that the language game of objectivism and relativism is only one way to cut the philosophical cake—and not necessarily the most useful one. As long as postmodernism is approached from an epistemological angle, its questioning of foundations and universals can indeed only be read as a case of relativism. Yet postmodernism is not a critique of the objectivist horn of the modern, epistemological worldview, but a critique of this worldview itself—i.e., of the worldview which holds that what is ultimate and fundamental in our relation to “the world” is our knowledge of it. This is why I believe that it is a category mistake to argue that postmodernism equals relativism. Postmodernism questions the framework from which relativism derives its meaning; it does *not* question one of the options within that framework. (148)

Because postmodernism has a clear and distinct ethical and political “agenda,” according to Biesta, it cannot afford to have commitments to relativism. The agenda that Biesta attributes to postmodernism is “to highlight the exclusion and injustice brought about by attempts to articulate a total, all-encompassing perspective or vision.” (149). Biesta reads Foucault’s thesis of the end of man “*not* as an attempt to erase humankind or humanity from the surface of the earth, but as an attempt to show that humanism . . . limits and excludes possible other ways of being human” (149).

Central to such conceptions of criticality is that there is no way to escape power/knowledge. Biesta argues that Foucault’s claim of the pervasiveness of power (or in our terms, “everything is ideology”) is intended as “a critique of the very terms in which Enlightenment itself has been conceived. As Foucault puts it, the task is to abandon ‘a whole

tradition that allows us to imagine that knowledge can only exist where the power relations are suspended” (154). The claim that we cannot stand external to systems of power, according to Biesta, does not necessitate determinism or that we are the eternal prisoners of the system. As he explains, this conclusion would only make sense under the assumption that critique is only possible from a position outside the system from which the system can be viewed. Biesta, following Foucault, implores us to move beyond such topographical, binary distinctions that prevent us from examining the limits of what is taken for granted.

To return to Burbules, the type of criticality advocated by critical pedagogy critiques “all forms of pedagogy that take reality as is, without asking questions about what made the situation as it is, who made the situation as it is, and whose interests are served by the status quo and the depiction of the status quo as natural and inevitable.”<sup>92</sup> Like Biesta, Burbules recognizes that what postmodernism and poststructuralism, broadly construed, add to both critical thinking and critical pedagogy is the understanding that all approaches to education exist within particular discursive frameworks and historical contexts that have material and social effects. Indeed, Burbules explains the opposition to metanarratives as not a rejection of theory but rather a challenge to all theory “to examine the effects of metanarratives as ways of framing the world; in this case, how claims of universality, or impartiality, or inclusiveness, or objectivity, variously characterize different positions within the Critical Thinking or Critical Pedagogy schools of thought.” Moreover, postmodern and poststructuralist insights afford us a way to question and doubt even our own presuppositions—the ones “without which we literally do not know how to think and act.”<sup>93</sup>

This understanding of criticality upon which I claim social justice education is so often grounded does not deny that such education is partisan but does insist that it is educative. Social justice education involves, first and foremost, a willingness to entertain certain questions about how and why knowledge gets constructed and, most significantly, a willingness to question why certain constructions of reality are validated by the dominant culture and why others are marginalized and dismissed. The objective is to bring to critical awareness what we view as natural, common sense, and, thus, unchangeable. In his discussion of genealogy, Foucault<sup>94</sup> refers to this type of awareness as “to question . . . what is postulated as self-evident . . . to dissipate what is familiar and accepted.”<sup>95</sup> As Foucault so articulately contends,

There are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than

one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all. In what does (philosophical activity) consist, if not in the endeavor to know how and to what extent it might be possible to think differently, instead of legitimating what is already known?<sup>96</sup>

The criterion by which Foucault justifies his theories, according to Linda Alcoff,<sup>97</sup> involves a type of pragmatism about those discourses that expand our imagination and those that constrict it. Theories are justified for Foucault to the extent that they “help to free us from locked-in ways of thinking in which we have lost the ability to reflect critically on our dominant concepts.”<sup>98</sup>

### AIMS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE EDUCATION—ADVOCACY WITHOUT IMPOSITION

Charges of liberal bias often gain plausibility because they are based on caricatures of what social justice education is all about. Audrey Thompson<sup>99</sup> argues that such misrepresentations of social justice education ironically, “*are themselves propagandist, dismissive in advance of any arguments that would challenge long-standing privileges.*”<sup>100</sup> Thus, it is important to briefly address some of the objectives of social justice education. I introduce this discussion with a conversation that Stephen Fishman and Lucille McCarthy recount and that is a common occurrence in courses that teach for social justice. A white student responds to a reading from bell hooks by claiming,

“Things have gotten better between the races. In my high school we had a whole month devoted to Black history.”

A Black student in the class retorts, “I’m supposed to be grateful?!!! I don’t care how many Black history months you have, you’ll always see me first and foremost as a Black woman. And if a Black man comes toward you at night, you’ll clutch your pocketbook and walk faster. . . . And if you’re right that things are so much better, why are there so few Black judges, lawyers, and doctors?”

Another Black student in support says, “It is no better than it was in 1960s. It’s just better hidden.” Another white student chimes in to the Black student, “If you really want to end racism, you gotta stop being so divisive.”<sup>101</sup>

What do the white students need to understand to acknowledge and understand what the students of color are telling them?

One of the objectives of social justice education is to help white students understand how racism is systemic, how race is socially constructed, how whiteness as the invisible norm systemically constitutes “difference,” and that white people can be complicit in sustaining the system unintentionally—even when they are not aware that they do so, and especially, even when they think they are morally good. The white students’ responses to the students of color in the aforementioned exchange is framed by their whiteness. The white students need to acknowledge how their notion of harm is influenced and perhaps limited by the conceptual framework and tools at their disposal. If one thinks racism is only about personal prejudice, if racism is understood as something only in the heart, not something in the world,<sup>102</sup> then what the students of color in this class are saying to their white classmates will not make sense.

Without the appropriate language and conceptual tools to connect personal experiences to historical, cultural, and economic systems of power and privilege, white students cannot begin to fathom how Black History Month can be a token response to inequality that reinforces marginalization while seeming to promote cultural understanding. Clarifying concepts and rational deliberation may play a role in social justice pedagogy. Yet a strong focus on rational deliberation may obstruct the development of listening skills that systemically privileged students need. Likewise, rational deliberation may frustrate marginalized students who are put in the position of educating those who are systemically privileged but have not yet learned how to listen. Sometimes silencing rational deliberation and debate may be the more just undertaking.<sup>103</sup>

Furthermore, what social justice educators require of all their students is engagement but not necessarily agreement.<sup>104</sup> The aim is to gain understanding. I have never had a student who was engaged with the material accuse me of “liberal bias,” and it seems that it is students who want to resist engagement who make such accusations. Perhaps that is why I tend to believe that such charges are employed as rhetorical strategies to justify the unwarranted dismissal of the material and a refusal to engage. Engagement might be discomforting and threatening for students who enjoy dominant group privilege and who have the luxury of choosing whether they want to critically reflect on their own assumptions about the social world and about themselves. To attempt to get a glimpse of what dominant group privilege looks like from the perspective of the marginalized, systemically privileged students must be willing to consider what they might believe is impossible to think and be willing to engage with questions they never thought to ask. Agreement cannot be coerced. Yet



what can be demanded is that students are engaged and willing to struggle with their beliefs and be open to being uncomfortable. Although I acknowledge that her guidelines are controversial, I believe this is the objective—engagement, not necessarily agreement—that Weber is trying to achieve. Since discomfort is crucial to learning in courses that teach about systemic social injustice, there is often resistance, and this might explain why certain groups of students lash out at the teacher and the course material in student evaluations.

To be critically reflective under the conditions of systemic injustice would require not just possessing logical and analytical skills but also the ability and the willingness to consider what is assumed impossible to think. Only with such critical reflection is it possible to recognize and expose when traditional frameworks are working in service of an unjust status quo. Social justice education aims to facilitate the development of such critical skills.

Furthermore, social justice education does not just aim to benefit the dominant but also hopes to create a safe place for the marginalized, or at least a classroom that does as much as possible to diminish the reproduction of oppression. Audrey Thompson<sup>105</sup> writes that “anti-oppressive pedagogy represents an important chance to help marginalized students flourish and to engage privileged students in knowledge-seeking that sets aside assumptions allowing them to condescend to, or dismiss, alternative perspectives.” This too might make silencing dominant students a warranted option when such students absolutely refuse to engage. Yet this can intensify the anger of dominant students who feel they are not given equal time to express their views. But social justice education cannot be neutral, as Peter McLaren underscores:

Critical educators argue that any worthwhile theory of schooling *must be partisan*. That is, it must be fundamentally tied to a struggle for a qualitatively better life for all through the construction of a society based on nonexploitative relations and social justice. The critical educator doesn’t believe that there are two sides to every question, with both sides needing equal attention. For the critical educator, there are *many* sides to a problem, and often these sides are linked to certain class, race, and gender interests.<sup>106</sup>

When certain voices do not want to engage in such critical reflection and are given the floor to express their views, the marginalized are injured again. If systemically privileged students are silenced, if they are not given the floor, they might demand “balance” when in fact such

silencing is necessary for “balance” in the context of systemic social injustice.

If classrooms are never neutral sites for the production of knowledge, attempts to challenge the status quo may be perceived as imposition by those already in power. And when the voices of the marginalized are centered in the classroom, dominant voices will *feel* silenced because their discourse, which has customarily passed uncritiqued, will now be the center of critique. Such dominant students may report on student evaluations that the teacher did not allow them to disagree with his or her position. At the same time, marginalized students may report in student evaluations that this is the first time they felt safe expressing their views in the classroom. In addition, students with dominant views may report that the course material is “biased” because race and gender are made explicit, whereas in other courses, these issues remain invisible.

## CONCLUSION

It seems like a good thing to attack anyone who is “politicizing” education, and it is desirable to stop the enemies of “intellectual diversity.” Yet it is more than ironic that these same strong advocates of “intellectual diversity” were silent during the decades when marginalized voices were struggling to be included in the canon and when lack of “intellectual diversity” was mystified as just what is the commonly understood truth.

Moreover, the charge of the repression of academic freedom often seems to arise only when such repression comes from the “left” who challenge the status quo. Someone can teach about multicultural education from a philosophical perspective with a reading list of almost all white male scholars, and this course will not likely be regarded as biased. Yet a course in which the professor selects a reading list that highlights what scholars of color write on this issue and requires that the students be exposed to scholarship that addresses the ways in which power works and that challenges the “knowledge” of the traditional curriculum will often be labeled “championing advocacy in the classroom” or “politicized scholarship.” In such courses, systemically privileged students may *feel* silenced not because they have been excluded but because they are used to having their own discourses go unchallenged. They may feel silenced when their own voices are no longer centered in the classroom, as they are accustomed. They may then interpret this as “the teacher does not let students disagree” and that the teacher is “biased” or “one sided.” At the same time, what continues to go unnoticed is that other students may feel enthusiastic in that they can express their views for the first time because they are confident that there will be zero tolerance for discussions that

are not engaged in understanding and challenging the culture of power in the classroom.

Horowitz's (and others') claims that teaching for social justice is a liberal bias cannot go without response because I contend that these claims support a refusal to engage. Moreover, his caricatured conception of social justice education is just what some of my students who do not want to engage turn to in order to rationalize their disengagement. Of course, social justice education involves a bias. It does not, however, necessarily entail indoctrination, propaganda, or imposition. Moreover, no matter how much they feel silenced, the sometimes-warranted silencing of certain privileged students does not make these students systemically marginalized.

Sometimes progressive educators accuse those who disagree with them of being ideological. However, the point of this critique is not exclusively about their bias, but rather about how dominance becomes obscured via normalization and discourse. It is not that what I teach is not an ideology, but rather that some ideologies function to obscure and naturalize social injustice while others seek to expose such injustice. Peter McLaren contends that

if we all can agree that as individuals, we inherit a preexisting sign community, and acknowledge that all ideas, values, and meanings have social roots and perform social functions, then understanding ideology becomes a matter of investigating *which* concepts, values, and meanings *obscure* our understanding of the social world and our place within the networks of power/knowledge relations, and which concepts, values, and meanings *clarify* such an understanding. In other words, why do certain ideological formations cause us to misrecognize our complicity in establishing or maintaining asymmetrical relations of power and privilege within the social order?<sup>107</sup>

Social justice education is both biased and ideological but not in a pejorative sense. It has an "agenda"—social justice—and does not retreat or cover over its partisanship. But social justice education does not of necessity involve indoctrination because of its partisanship. It is not necessarily about "pounding the pulpit," as they have been accused of doing, and those who teach such courses, like anyone who teaches any course, must be constantly vigilant about using the classroom as an abuse of power.

Charges of liberal bias are dangerous, for they function to suppress any challenge to power. They support students' resistance and disengagement, and uphold and fortify what is considered impossible to question.

For instance, in the world in which white students are used to having the privilege to decide whether to confront or ignore issues of race, in which the request to feel “safe” can be decoded to mean being safe from having to hear the pain and anger of people of color and also feeling “free” to express racist ideas without having to be held accountable, it should therefore not be surprising that they feel resentment toward me and the course material, and that gets expressed in their student evaluations. I have to continue to reflect on the ways to constructively address how I can engage my students while still being an explicit advocate of social justice. To retreat from challenging them, however, would be to perpetuate oppressive relations in my classroom. I leave the question open about how, in actuality, one can be explicit in terms of one’s advocacy and yet encourage engagement, not resistance. However, I hope it is clear that teacher advocacy does not necessarily imply that one is imposing and not educational. What I recommend is that we stop wasting our attention and energy wondering whether social justice education is a “liberal bias” and rather focus our inquiries on how to get resisting students to engage, but not at the expense of the marginalized.

### Notes

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5. American Council of Trustees and Alumni Press Release, “Survey Reveals Pervasive Political Pressure in the Classroom,” November 30, 2004, <http://www.goacta.org/press/Press%20Releases/11-30-04PR.htm> (accessed July 27, 2007).
6. Stanley Fish, “Conspiracy Theories 101,” *New York Times*, July 23, 2006. In this article, Fish discusses the case of Kevin Barrett, a lecturer at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. In a course on Islam, religion, and culture, he expressed to his students his personal view that September 11 was an inside job organized by members of the American

government. Fish contends that academic freedom is not about saying whatever one likes but about the ability to study any idea even if it challenges what is taken as truth.

7. Paula Wasley, "Accreditor of Education Schools Drops Controversial 'Social Justice' Language," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 16, 2006, <http://chronicle.com/>.

8. Lisa Delpit, "The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children," *Harvard Educational Review* 58, No. 3 (1988): 280–98.

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